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ABSTRACT

Some of the main issues surrounding the operation of mentoring programs for minority youth are outlined and illustrated through the example of the Male Youth Project, a church-based program in Washington, D.C. Screening, orienting, and rewarding mentors are aspects of program operation that are fundamental. Other issues include the youth to mentor ratio, the question of time commitment, and program costs. Where to have the program, how to involve parents, and the question of matching mentors by race are other aspects that cannot be ignored. The Male Youth Project aims to assist young men in their transition from boyhood to manhood. Youth are grouped into teams by age, and each team is headed by a mentor. This approach solves the problem of too many youth and too few mentors. The links between the mentoring program and the church, parents, and community are a major source of strength. The Male Youth Project also features a biannual rites of passage ceremony for youths who have turned 13 years of age. A subsequent Manhood Training Program emphasizes physical, mental, and spiritual tasks to be completed with the assistance and encouragement of the mentor. Well-designed and carefully implemented mentoring programs can be effective in meeting the needs of disadvantaged black male youths. (SLD)

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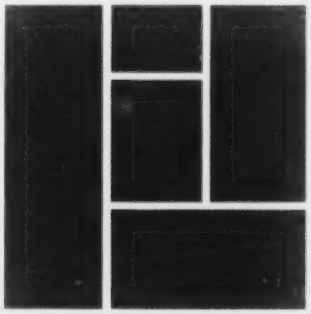

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Project Report

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Minority Male Mentoring in the 1990s: A Practitioner's Experience

Andre Watson

June 1991

Mentoring that helps ease the transition from youth to adulthood for minority youth is needed now more than ever. America's high rates of single-parent households, youth poverty, drug addiction, and teen pregnancy make it clear that society must assist the embattled family. If designed and implemented carefully, mentoring programs can be a very effective community tool for improving social and economic problems at the local level.

This paper outlines some of the main issues surrounding the operation of mentoring programs for minority youths. Although discussion focuses on the "ideal" program in the "ideal" world, comments are based on my concrete involvement with several mentoring programs in Washington, D.C. Following an outline of issues is a profile of the Male Youth Project, the church-based program I recently directed. This program, although far from perfect, offers several features that have contributed to its success in reaching black youths.

KEY ISSUES FOR MENTORING PROGRAMS

There are all kinds of mentoring programs for young minority males, but their quality and degree of effectiveness are closely linked to how well they are planned and carried out. Below is an outline of the issues that, based on my many experiences with mentoring efforts, I believe are central to the design and operation of an effective mentoring program. Under each issue is a discussion of what has been found to work, based on my own experience with such programs, particularly that offered by the Male Youth

Project, based at the Shiloh Baptist Church in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, D.C. This program serves participants who primarily come from female-headed households in a low-income inner city neighborhood.

Screening, Orienting, and Rewarding Mentors

One of the major obstacles to any mentoring program is the recruitment and retention of good mentors. Older, retired men who are more likely than others to be available for mentoring may not make the most appropriate and useful mentors because of their old-fashioned views about young people. A 65-year-old man who believes that boys should be "seen but not heard" will surely find it difficult to deal with a young man with an "attitude." My program has the luxury of being able to draw upon a ready pool of reliable men from the church in which it is based for mentors. Other potential mentors might be drawn from nearby military bases or college fraternity houses. The constant mobility of the two latter groups, however, is one drawback to their recruitment.

Screening. Programs that must rely on total strangers as mentor applicants must adopt stringent screening procedures. Some applicants may have questionable or undesirable intentions, and some may simply not provide the appropriate role model for program youths. One program in Washington, D.C. includes as part of its screening process a police check, a psychological profile, a references check, a personal interview, and a home visit. The advantage of these procedures is that they eliminate inappropriate mentors. The disadvantage is that they are time consuming and costly, and are disconcerting for those "clean" mentors who are anxious

to start the program. Another issue, beyond that of quality of moral character, is whether or not the applicant is suited for this kind of work. When interviewing mentor applicants for my program, I ask them how they would deal with specific incidents, such as being in a car with a protege who tries to secretly slip a dropped marijuana joint back into his jacket pocket. What would the mentor say to him, and would he tell the boy's mother? The answers give a good indication of whether or not the applicant is prepared to deal with the kinds of issues that arise in a mentor/youth relationship.

Orienting. An important feature of a successful mentoring program is the orientation it provides for mentors, both initially and throughout the mentoring process. In briefing new mentors, program staff must be adamant about the program's goals and objectives, guidelines that must be strictly followed, and precisely what is required of the mentors. It is essential to be as specific as possible here. What a boy and his family hope to get out of the program is sometimes difficult to identify, and may be different in different cases. In the Male Youth Project, we sit down with the mother right from the beginning and ask what she hopes her son might gain from the program by the time he leaves. Periodic meetings should be set up to reassess the program's objectives and the degree to which the mentors are helping to meet these goals.

Rewarding. Since mentoring is primarily a voluntary effort, it is absolutely critical to reward mentors for their efforts. This point cannot be overstressed. Many mentors join the program for egotistical rather than financial rewards, so their contributions must be acknowledged as often as

possible. The Male Youth Project, for instance, holds an annual banquet at which it presents gold-, bronze-, and silver-level awards to mentors, depending on their level of time commitment and degree of participation. Another method of reward is listing mentors' names in the newspaper, in printed material about the program, or on bulletin boards.

Youth/Mentor Ratio

In the best of all worlds, every youth would have his own mentor. Based on my experience, however, the reality is that there are not enough minority male mentors to reach all youths in need. The Male Youth Project has 4 staff people for 25 to 30 boys a day. Although staff are spread thinly, not every boy needs individual attention on a daily basis. We are hoping in the future to be able to identify in a more systematic way those boys in more need of help than others. Currently, individual assistance is offered as needed.

Time Commitment

Both short-term and long-term minimums need to be clearly established from the beginning so that the mentor understands his responsibilities. The Big Brothers of the National Capital Area program requires a minimum of four hours of face-to-face contact every other week for at least one year; the program I directed does not require a specific number of hours. There is no "best" model, but whatever one is adopted must be clearly stated and adhered to.

Program Costs

Even with programs that use volunteer mentors there are still costs involved. It should be stressed that money should not be a core factor in the relationship between a mentor and youth, since "quality time" is the most important service and money tends to complicate the relationship. It cannot be overstated that mentors should be careful not to be perceived as a financial outlet for program youth. Whenever possible, parents should absorb any costs associated with their child's mentoring program.

The issue of staff costs and whether or not mentors should be paid are both important. Big Brothers of the National Capital Area estimates that it costs approximately $600 to cover staff services per mentor/youth match. These services include, for example, screening, interviewing, processing, and monitoring. I strongly advocate having at least one paid, accountable staff member to manage a mentoring program. The program I directed had 2 full-time and 3 part-time paid staff plus 10 to 15 volunteers, but we are in a fortunate position.

Should mentors be paid? In the ideal world, mentors should not be paid because youths can be discouraged by thinking that mentors may be motivated by money rather than altruism. However, in light of how challenging it can be to recruit mentors, there are some cases when certain types of mentors might be compensated. A good example is college students who are interested in working with youth. They can be energetic and enthusiastic, but also in need of income. Mentoring programs must use all available methods to recruit mentors, including those that offer stipends when possible.

The Question of Race

Ideally, youths should be matched with mentors of the same race. Young black youths are under so many pressures, and having a mentor from another race only adds one more. However, again we are forced to adjust to reality. There is a shortage of black adult males volunteering to serve as mentors. Cultural awareness among black youth is an extremely important issue, and many social scientists tie Afrocentrism directly to the self-esteem of black youths. However, in many cases the paucity of black mentors dictates that black youths be paired with white mentors. It should be recognized that differences in race are not a barrier to a successful mentor/youth relationship.

Location of Program: In School or Out?

Mentoring programs can be operated within or outside of the school setting, but my preference is the latter. Whether or not the program is school-based, program staff should coordinate their efforts with those of the school, or minimally, communicate with school authorities and teachers about the mentoring program. My own bias toward creating a mentoring program outside the school setting is elaborated in the discussion below of the church-based Male Youth Project.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is critical, but often missing. It is important for a youth to know that his parent is interested in him and the mentoring

program. Parent participation is essential in that it deters parents from using mentoring as an excuse for relinquishing their parental responsibilities. Based on the program participants with whom I have worked, I believe that most problems surrounding male youths are family-based. Mentoring programs are often frustrated by the fact that they "clean off" the youths, only to send them back to their homes or neighborhoods to be "muddied up" again. The goal of mentoring programs is to eliminate the "mud." Working hand-in-hand with the family is critical in reaching this goal.

Parents might get involved in two ways. One way is to form a support group for the program that helps plan and coordinate activities and conduct parent workshops. Another way is for parents to volunteer to help recruit mentors and youth, and perform administrative tasks to free up staff to handle more complex responsibilities.

At the same time, however, parents must allow the youth/mentor relationship space to develop and grow. Many young men need to know that their mentors are completely separate from their authority figures at home (or at school, for that matter).

Mentor as Family Advocate

The mentor's primary obligation is to the youth, not his family. But this can be a tricky issue because so many of youths' problems are family-based. It <u>is</u> appropriate for mentors to refer youths' families to the relevant social service agency, but the mentor should do so with the assistance of program staff. Staff should maintain an updated list of

social service organizations and they, rather than the mentor, should take over the responsibility for larger family-related problems.

PROFILE OF A SUCCESSFUL MINORITY MENTORING PROGRAM: THE MALE YOUTH PROJECT

The Male Youth Project is based in Shiloh Baptist Church in downtown Washington, D.C. It aims to assist young men in their transition from boyhood to manhood. This is accomplished by providing a menu of activities that address the physical, mental, and spiritual development of the youths. The church screens mentors for the program, and together with a parent support group and an advisory committee, serves as part of the program's support base. The program manages to overcome the common problem of too few mentors for too many youths by forming the youths into three teams: Frederick Douglass (high school level); Malcolm X (junior high); and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (elementary school). Each team is headed by a mentor, who spends additional time when possible with team members with especially acute needs.

Some examples of the kinds of activities sponsored by the Male Youth Project include a daily hour-long "study hall" after school, physical exams, basketball teams, chess teams, computer classes, African-American quizzes, camping trips, and parent support group meetings.

Elements of a Successful Program

There are several elements of the Male Youth Project that I believe may contribute to the program's success. First, it serves all male youth, not only those in most dire need of help. In this way it reaches youth before

they get to the desperate stage. Second, it is organized around groups and teams that foster positive interaction among peer group members and thereby reinforce program goals. Third, by having multiple staffing plans, the program is able to meet the varying needs of the youths. For example, the program offers one-on-one mentoring for those with severe needs. Fourth, the program not only provides specific activities for youths, but also serves as a place where they can just "hang out" after school. Having both a place to go and mentors to talk to after school is very important to boys who may have no other place to go during these hours. Finally, the program encourages "graduates" of the program to return as mentors themselves. Maintaining their membership in a successful group environment allows these youths to continue to belong to the "family" many of them still need even after graduation.

Institutional Link Up

One of the fundamental tenets of the program is the importance of providing a working relationship among the four institutions with the most impact on a youth's life: home, school, church, and community. The philosophy underlying this principle is that the inadequacies of any one of these influential factors can adversely affect a youth's development. Minimizing these inadequacies can also minimize the damage they cause youth. Mentors are critical in the effort to link these four social institutions. In the Male Youth Project, mentors meet periodically with youth, parents, teachers, and project staff to discuss progress and setbacks. They visit youths in their homes, at school, and at church. The

idea is to strengthen the healthy effects of the home, school, church, and community on youth and to compensate for the gaps that may exist in these institutions' provision of support to youths.

The Rites of Passage and Manhood Training Programs

There are a number of mentoring programs around the country for black youths that emphasize the building of a strong self-image through a focus on African heritage. The Male Youth Project utilizes the nationwide popular Rites of Passage and Manhood Training programs to assist young black males in their transition from boyhood to manhood. Both of these "programs" (the former is more a ceremony than anything else) are loosely based on African rites of passage from boyhood to manhood.

All youths who participate in the Male Youth Project's mentoring program automatically undergo the Rites of Passage when they turn 13. The Manhood Training program, on the other hand, is reserved for the select few who are willing to accept its challenge, who have already gone through the Rites of Passage, and who are sponsored by their mentor to participate in this more difficult challenge.

Rites of Passage. The Rites of Passage ceremony, as adopted by the Male Youth Project, is a biannual ceremony held in July and December for qualifying youths who have turned 13 years of age. The ceremony serves as a target for the mentored youths to work toward. A minister delivers an address on "Becoming a Man" and then lights candles held by the mentors, who in turn light candles held by the youths. While the candles are lit, the minister reads a poem on manhood, which is repeated by the youths. The

ceremony, accompanied by a dinner, is a special event that is attended by parents, other program youths, project staff, mentors, and advisory committee members. It is viewed as a positive psychological tool that helps youths make the difficult transition to adulthood.

Manhood Training. The Manhood Training program is a series of physical, mental, and spiritual tasks that youths complete in three stages, named after the Swahili words for same: "moanzi" (beginning), "katikati" (middle), and "mwisho" (end). The entire process takes at least three months to complete. Examples of the kinds of "tests" the youths are required to take represent the physical, mental, and spiritual challenges of the program. These include running a mile or earning the project's yellow belt in kung fu; maintaining a 2.2 grade point average or completing a book report on an African-American who has made a contribution to society; attending different religious services once a month for three months or mastering the ability to meditate for at least five minutes.

As stated above, a youth must be sponsored by his mentor to enter the Manhood Training program. This sponsoring mentor is generally the same mentor who lit his candle in the Rites of Passage ceremony. He plays a critical role in the program as guide, supporter, and cheerleader who assures that the youth will complete the tests before him. His involvement with the program begins with a meeting with the youth and his parent(s) to review the more than 30 physical, mental, and spiritual tasks — provided in written material — and to discuss how to accomplish them. It is from this initial meeting that the mentor seeks to enlist the support of the

youth's family in this endeavor, because the boy's initial enthusiasm may wane and he may need periodic encouragement.

A sponsoring mentor meets with the youth on a weekly basis to plan his weekly program tasks. The mentor dates and signs off on each completed task, keeping a written record of same. Thus, an additional benefit to the Manhood Training program is the special one-on-one relationship it offers between mentors and youths. For many young males, this is the first such relationship they have ever had, and may remain a longstanding one throughout their lives.

In summary, mentoring programs as a community effort to enhance the success of disadvantaged black youths can be effective if well designed and implemented. Most importantly, mentoring programs need to adapt both to the needs of local youth and to the realities of personnel and budget constraints. The church-based Male Youth Project in a low-income neighborhood of Washington, D.C. combines several elements, including a ceremony and a special program based on African heritage, to promote a physical, mental, and spiritual sense of self-esteem among young black youths.